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## Why Do We Need More Women Leaders in Higher Education?

Susan R. Madsen, *Utah Valley University*

Research has shown that most managers and top leadership teams do not fully realize the value of having women in key positions, and this is the case across all sectors, including business, government, political, nonprofit, religious, community, and education (schools, colleges, and universities).<sup>1</sup> Organizations will increasingly thrive when both men and women hold management and leadership roles.<sup>2</sup> Gender inclusivity benefits not only businesses, but also entities such as churches, state legislatures, and city councils. This potential for greater thriving is also true for institutions of higher education in the U.S. and around the world. Understanding the value of inclusivity in postsecondary educational settings is critical and timely. In these uncertain times, all schools, colleges, and universities have goals toward increased effectiveness, efficiency, productivity, and overall organizational performance. Heightening awareness of the value of women in leadership is an opportunity for institutions to begin and/or strengthen related efforts toward reaching these goals. National efforts, such as the Moving the Needle Initiative,<sup>3</sup> are gaining momentum as they seek to increase awareness of the continued lack of gender parity in higher education leadership and to draw attention to the many organizational benefits that result from embracing inclusive diversity.

Research affirms that a variety of internal and external barriers can hinder women from becoming managers and leaders.<sup>4</sup> Although this brief can assist women in understanding why they should lead (overcoming an internal barrier), its primary purpose is to help staff, faculty, administrators, and other key stakeholders to better understand the benefits of attracting, retaining, promoting, and empowering women within their institutions. These benefits will be introduced in the

following sections: (1) improving financial performance, (2) strengthening organizational climate, (3) increasing corporate social responsibility and reputation, (4) leveraging talent, and (5) enhancing innovation and collective intelligence.

### Improving Financial Performance

A series of recent studies has shown that organizations that have more women in management and on boards typically attain better financial results than do other organizations.<sup>5</sup> For example, according to a recent Catalyst Information Center report, *Why Diversity Matters*, a 2011 study found that “companies with the most women board directors out-performed those with the least on return on sales (ROS) by 16 percent and return on invested capital (ROIC) by 26 percent.”<sup>6</sup> In 2012, Bloomberg published a large study (2,360 companies) conducted by the Credit Suisse Research Institute, which found that “companies with a market capitalization of more than \$10 billion and with women board members outperformed comparable businesses with all-male boards by 26 percent worldwide.”<sup>7</sup> A number of other recent studies have also found that companies of various sizes with “more women directors actually rank higher on various performance measures than other boards”<sup>8</sup> and that there are “positive correlations between gender diversity on boards and improvements in corporate governance and financial performance.”<sup>9</sup>

Other financial performance indicators have also been studied. First, the *New York Law Journal* reported that companies with at least one female director “averaged higher net income growth, lower net debt-to-equity ratio, and faster reduction in debt

## ***Improving Financial Performance***

***Better financial results***

***Increased profitability***

***Higher operating result***

***Better economic growth***

***Faster debt reduction***

***Lower risk of insolvency***

***Better business deals***

***Less risky bids***

***Better stock growth***

***Higher market-to-book value***

***Better corporate governance***

***Better corporate oversight***

***Improved organizational sustainability***

compared to companies with no female directors.”<sup>10</sup>

Second, a U.K. study found clear evidence that companies with women directors had a lower risk of insolvency than did other companies.<sup>11</sup> Third, a recent Canadian study found that having women on corporate boards helps companies strike better business deals. The study found that “companies with female directors bring down costs of acquiring other firms, [and] make less risky bids.”<sup>12</sup> Women directors can help their companies make fewer errors that financially hurt their stakeholders.<sup>13</sup> The researchers claim that women tend to be less overconfident than men, especially in times of uncertainty. Another scholar stated that “women appear to be less motivated by empire-building” and are “less likely to take on an acquisition unless they feel very sure that it’ll be good for shareholders.”<sup>14</sup>

Finally, *Why Diversity Matters* cited studies that identified the following benefits: higher operating results, better stock growth, better economic growth, higher market-

to-book value, better corporate governance and oversight, improved corporate sustainability, and overall increased profitability.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, data from a host of national and international studies have shown a trend that companies with females in leadership teams and on executive boards have experienced better financial performance.<sup>16</sup> Most of the research has been conducted within the business arena, but some research shows that these and/or related benefits can also extend to other sectors. However, it is important to note that some of the cited studies found that in order to obtain some of the above-listed financial performance benefits, a critical mass of women (about 30%) on boards or leadership teams must be present.<sup>17</sup> In today’s climate of spiraling education costs and tuition increases, the financial performance of institutions is subject to considerable scrutiny. Increasing the representation of women on boards and in leadership positions can beneficially strengthen the financial position of colleges and universities.

## ***Strengthening Organizational Climate***

Researchers have also discovered a host of organizational climate benefits associated with the number of women serving in management and leadership positions. First, a number of studies have found that an organizational climate that is open to diversity is linked to employees’ lower intentions to leave.<sup>18</sup> Second, one study of government agencies in the U.S. found that employees were more satisfied when they perceived that diversity was effectively managed and that managers were fair to all employees.<sup>19</sup> Third, other research has confirm that women leaders typically help to ensure that more women are hired and in the pipeline for future leadership.<sup>20</sup> Fourth, having more women in senior leadership roles is also linked to a

smaller gender pay gap and wage increases, particularly for women at higher levels of organizations.<sup>21</sup> Fifth, the Corporate Leadership Council discovered a link connecting commitment to diversity and inclusion with the level of employee engagement.<sup>22</sup> Finally, one report stated that “mirroring the community can lead to a boost in productivity, customer satisfaction, and earnings.”<sup>23</sup> For example, a retail company documented that when its store employees matched the demographic profile of the community, sales increased. Because women constitute the majority of consumers today, companies are finding that it makes sense to have more female employees who better understand the needs of female consumers.<sup>24</sup> Within higher education settings, the same case could be made as most institutions have more female students.

Women leaders also tend to look more carefully at issues of fairness in policies and practices for all employees. A Chinese study found that boards with higher numbers of women were less likely to violate security regulations and to commit fraud. This study concluded

### **Strengthening Organizational Climate**

- Decreased turnover intentions*
- Higher employee satisfaction*
- More women hired for pipeline*
- Smaller gender pay gap*
- Increased employee engagement*
- Increased productivity*
- Higher customer satisfaction*
- Lower corporate fraud*
- Reduced groupthink*
- Higher team performance*
- More considerate team members*
- More ethical decisions*

that female board members appeared to contribute to reduced groupthink, better board independence, and improved monitoring.<sup>25</sup> Related studies have confirmed these findings in other countries and contexts.

Women also bring beneficial competencies and skills to teams. One field study experiment in Amsterdam found that mixed-gender teams had a higher team performance. Performance peaked when student teams were composed of about 55% women.<sup>26</sup> Other scholars have documented that participants of more diverse teams described their teams as being more considerate and that team leaders were better able to see each member as unique and as a valued contributor.<sup>27</sup> In addition, inclusive leadership styles, most commonly found in women, are also linked to reduced turnover and improved performance of diverse teams.<sup>28</sup> Finally, research has confirmed that more diverse groups and teams make more effective and ethical choices and decisions.<sup>29</sup> Thus, colleges and universities that have diverse leadership teams are more likely to benefit in numerous ways, including increased productivity through better decision making and the retention of students and valued employees.

### **Increasing CSR & Organizational Reputation**

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a hot topic of discussion for organizations around the world. One question is whether women influence the CSR or related social or community involvement of an organization. The *Why Diversity Matters* report states that “gender-inclusive leadership is associated with increased corporate social responsibility.”<sup>30</sup> It also cites research linking the number of women in leadership positions to a positive impact on a company’s social responsiveness. In addition, the Committee for Economic Development argues that having more women on boards helps organizations better engage with society.<sup>31</sup> For example, a study of privately owned Chinese firms showed that companies with more

## ***Increasing CSR & Organizational Reputation***

***Increased CSR***

***Higher-quality CSR initiatives***

***Greater social responsiveness***

***Better engagement with society***

***Greater philanthropic responses***

***Improved corporate reputation***

***Better corporate social performance***

***Increased social performance indicators***

women on their boards were more likely to respond philanthropically to natural disasters.<sup>32</sup> Multiple studies found connections between greater numbers of women leaders and significantly higher levels of corporate philanthropy.<sup>33</sup> In sum, research has found that women tend to be more concerned with CSR and feel more compelled to be involved with efforts to help society, particularly families, children, the needy, and others who are underserved. The findings are important for any sector, including higher education.

Research clearly shows that CSR activities have a positive influence on an organization's reputation, and as the authors of one report stated, "Companies viewed as ethical or good corporate citizens were more likely to have more women board directors than companies without those reputations."<sup>34</sup> Internal culture and practices can strengthen organizational reputation. For example, gender-diverse leadership teams and boards have been found to improve corporate reputation. Another study found that having women on boards was clearly connected to a number of key social performance indicators linked to both internal and external reputation (e.g., community,

corporate governance, diversity, employee relations, environment, human rights, and product-related social issues).<sup>35</sup> Thus, increasing the diversity of institutional leadership will contribute to accomplishing the mission of higher education as colleges and universities strive to contribute positively to society and the world.

## **Leveraging Talent**

Women tend to exhibit some different leadership characteristics and attributes than do men. These are not necessarily better or worse, merely different. Sometimes male attributes are needed; sometimes female attributes are preferred, and often both sets of attributes can add value to a situation, strategy, or effort. One scholar noted that female attributes are particularly valued in today's economy because of the fast changing global environment, which includes cultural diversity and social, political, and economic uncertainty.

Some research says that women tend to be more holistic rather than linear thinkers. They usually look for win-win instead of win-lose solutions and are often more process-oriented than men are.<sup>37</sup> Women also often ask different questions. For example, within the political and governmental sectors, women bring diverse life experiences, policy perspectives, and concerns that differ from those of men.<sup>38</sup> Women are also known to be more sensitive to nonverbal communication cues and are often more comfortable with ambiguity.<sup>39</sup> One researcher reported that new pathways to better decision making have been forged through women's diverse leadership styles and their focus on inclusiveness and cooperation.<sup>40</sup> In addition, women tend to be more nurturing and often care deeply about developing others around them, which makes them particularly powerful role models, mentors, and coaches for women and men alike.

In today's world, there continues to be a myth that men are better leaders than women, but—according to a host of studies in the last two decades—that is just not the case. In fact, women have outperformed men on numerous leadership competencies in a number of recent studies. For example, one study of 3,000 executives from nearly 150 countries found that subordinates rated women leaders higher than men on competencies such as energizing others, design and aligning, tenacity, and outside orientation.<sup>41</sup> Other researchers looked at data from 7,000 leaders and found that, according to subordinates, peers, and superiors, women outperformed men on 12 of 16 measures of outstanding leadership competencies and scored the same as men in the other four.<sup>42</sup> Most significantly, women's scores lead those of men in taking initiative, practicing self-development, displaying high integrity

### **Leveraging Talent**

- Think more holistically**
- Seek win-win solutions**
- More process-oriented**
- Ask different questions**
- Bring difference experiences**
- Sensitive to nonverbal cues**
- Comfortable with ambiguity**
- Use different leadership styles**
- Focus on inclusiveness**
- Focus on teams and cooperation**
- More nurturing**
- Focus on developing others**
- Make more ethical decisions**
- Have higher integrity/honesty**
- Focus on self-development**

and honesty, and driving for results. The leadership styles and traits most commonly associated with women are those that will be the most effective as universities and colleges navigate current challenges. These styles break down silos and create collaborative and cooperative environments that foster innovation and new discovery.

### **Enhancing Innovation and Collective Intelligence**

Studies continue to report that diverse and inclusive leadership teams produce more creative and innovative results. *Scientific American* article “How Diversity Makes Us Smarter,” based on decades of research from organizational scientists, psychologists, sociologists, economists, and demographers, states: “The fact is that if you want to build teams or organizations capable of innovating, you need diversity. Diversity enhances creativity. It encourages the search for novel information and perspectives, leading to better decision making and problem solving. Diversity can improve the bottom line of companies and lead to unfettered discoveries and breakthrough innovations. Even simply being exposed to diversity can change the way you think.”<sup>43</sup>

The Catalyst Information Center reports that “better problem-solving and increased creativity are positively associated with a variety of diversity attributes.”<sup>44</sup> For example, German researchers found in one study that teams with women and minorities performed better on highly complex tasks primarily because of the wider range of thinking processes and increased creativity.<sup>45</sup> Another study found that mixed-gender U.S. teams in the IT industry produced more patents for new products than all-male teams.<sup>46</sup> Other researchers agree that having more women in groups has been linked to effectiveness in solving difficult problems.<sup>47</sup>

## **Enhancing Innovation & Collective Intelligence**

**Increased innovation**

**Improved creativity**

**Better team decision making**

**Greater team problem solving**

**Better team performance on highly complex tasks**

**Increased knowledge formation and patents**

**Higher collective intelligence**

**Higher social sensitivity**

Researchers from MIT, Carnegie Mellon University, and Union College studied collective intelligence levels in high-functioning groups.<sup>48</sup> They found that the number of women was a major factor in creating groups with the best internal dynamics for ultimate collective intelligence. Social sensitivity was identified as a critical component for success, and these researchers found that women had higher levels. Their research findings revealed that the “number of women in the group significantly predicted the effective problem-solving abilities of the group overall.”<sup>49</sup> As with other studies, the researchers also found that the collective intelligence of the group exceeded the cognitive abilities and aptitudes of the individual members of the group. This collective intelligence is critical to effective decision making and problem solving, as well as high levels of innovation and creativity. Innovation and creativity are essential to research and discovery—the hallmark of higher education.

## **Conclusion**

The summary of the research in this brief provides a compelling case that gender is an important consideration in crafting the composition of management and leadership within groups, organizations, and other social entities. Particularly in higher education, bringing together the strengths of both men and women can result in more effective, productive, and innovative teams and institutions. Gender inclusivity can benefit everyone and is especially important to institutions of higher education that are facing the significant challenges that lie ahead.

The bottom line is that the most successful organizations of the future will be those that attract, retain, and grow talent in ways that provide more women with the opportunity to succeed at all levels, and we need more of these types of institutions within higher education today. Organizations and societies that fail to fully use female talent will limit both their own economic and noneconomic growth and opportunities.<sup>50</sup> Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women’s perspectives at all levels of decision making, we will not effectively achieve the economic and societal goals of communities, states, and nations.

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